

We all have awkward moments. Like when you are a Pastor preaching in front of your congregation and your three year old son waddles up to the altar to inform you that he has a dirty diaper. Yes, apparently I was guilty of that as a little child... Or when the organist begins to play a song and you start to sing, one beat ahead of everyone else. Or when the Pastor is presiding over a funeral service, and as the special music is being played from his Cell Phone through the church sound system, his phone begins to ring with the Ghostbusters theme song. Yep, I'm guilty of that one too. Needless to say, I now triple check to make sure my mobile device is on airplane mode when I'm using it for worship.

Lately, if you have been surfing the internet, or scrolling through Facebook posts, you may have noticed that awkward moments have become Internet memes. All of these messages begin with the words, "That awkward moment when ...". For example: "That awkward moment when the only thing you know on the test is your name." "That awkward moment when your boss sends you a friend request on Facebook." "That awkward moment when everyone is serious, and you start laughing." "That awkward moment when you say goodbye to someone, and then start walking in the same direction." Yeah, that's awkward.

Apparently awkwardness is part of the national mood these days, and advertisers are picking up on it. According to David Ignatius in *The Washington Post*, many "television commercials end with a deliberately awkward moment, where the characters make non sequiturs, or say things that make others uncomfortable, or otherwise look like miscast nerds." You've probably seen regular Rob Lowe and painfully awkward Rob Lowe explaining the differences between DIRECTV and cable. "Hi, I'm Rob Lowe and I have DIRECTV," says the regular actor. "And I'm painfully awkward Rob Lowe," says the actor with greasy hair and high-water pants. "I have cable." Advertisers have made the discovery that awkward sells. "It takes the edge off," says Ignatius in his article. "It's fashionably

geeky. It's anti-elitist. It's memorable in its otherness. And it's inclusive: For, really, what's more down-to-earth and American than feeling awkward?"

This morning in our Gospel story from Luke you might say that Jesus creates some awkwardness when he says to his disciples, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled." Although he is known as the Prince of Peace, Jesus surprises his hearers by asking, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division ... father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother!" That's awkward! But Jesus knows what he is doing!

Just as advertising today, is memorable because it is awkward, Jesus grabs our attention with his unexpected and uncomfortable words. He's giving us a message about the kingdom of God, a new order in which the social structures of the world are completely rearranged. This is not an easy transformation, even for Jesus, who says, "What stress I am under until it is completed!" Yes, stress. Even Jesus feels stress. So, how would you complete this sentence? "That awkward moment when Jesus asks you to"

A Presbyterian pastor was in his office when a call came in from the local hospital. A man was dying in the ICU, and his nephew called and asked for the pastor to visit. Although the man had grown up Presbyterian, he was no longer affiliated with any church. A visit to a total stranger on his deathbed. That can be a little awkward! But the end of life is a precious time, and the pastor knew that Jesus would want him to be there. So he drove to the hospital, put on a gown and gloves, and went into the ICU. He met the nephew and was introduced to the dying man, who was awake but largely unresponsive.

The nephew asked the pastor to say a few words. So he assured the man that nothing in all creation -- nothing in life and not even death itself -- could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. He read the passage from Paul's

letter to the Romans that contained that promise. And he encouraged the man to continue to put his trust in God and in his Son Jesus.

Then the nephew asked the pastor to tell his uncle about the thief on the cross, and about how it is never too late to turn to Christ. The pastor told the story of the two thieves who were crucified next to Jesus. One mocked Jesus, while the other put his faith in him, and Jesus said to the second one, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." Then the pastor told the dying man that it is never too late to turn to Jesus, to receive his forgiveness, and enter into everlasting life with him.

The dying man never spoke. But fortunately no words are needed at a time like that. All that is needed is a heart that trusts in Jesus. The visit ended with the pastor holding hands with the man and his nephew, and offering a prayer for strength, and peace, and faith. Was the visit awkward? You might think so. But if it helped a dying man put his trust in Christ, and transition to the kingdom of God, then it was completely worth it.

Now, the rule for marketers these days is "wear your awkwardness on your sleeve." Especially if you want to reach the millennial generation. Simon Dumenco, a media columnist for *Advertising Age*, says, "that the hottest of television shows these days celebrate a sort of nerdy uneasiness." Think of "The Big Bang Theory or New Girl." Or the more recent "Only Murders in the Building." They seem to celebrate Awkwardness! Perhaps Christians should embrace their awkwardness as well. It can work in our outreach to millennials, perhaps even to Gen Z, and to older adults as well. What, for you, is "That awkward moment when Jesus asks you to ...?"

Was it to Speak the truth in love? Many people who are addicted to drugs or alcohol will not accept help unless they are confronted with the facts of their chemical dependency. Maybe someday you will be called upon to be part of an

intervention, in which you will need to speak the truth in love, or perhaps you have been through one at some point in your life, or in the life of someone else. An intervention is a confrontation, and it can be awkward. But it can also be life-saving, as it helps people to face the reality of their disease and begin to get help. Interventions can help people to reconnect with the real world -- God's world.

How about that awkward moment when Jesus asks you to *pay attention to signs of the kingdom*? In today's narrative, Jesus criticizes the crowds who are able to predict the coming of rain, or the arrival of a scorching heat wave, but cannot see the coming of the kingdom of God. We might criticize the crowd around Jesus, but do we perform any better? Perhaps we are focusing on the wrong things -- we're able to spot the arrival of the latest iPhone, but we cannot see signs of trouble in our marriages, our families, our churches, or our communities for that matter. New Testament scholar R. Alan Culpepper asks, "Have we given as much attention to the health of the church as we have to our golf score? Have we given as much attention to the maintenance of our spiritual disciplines, as we have to the maintenance schedule for our car?"

Paying attention to the health of our church family, and our own spirituality, can be awkward. It's much easier to focus on our golf scores or on our car's maintenance schedule. But Jesus challenges us to look for signs of the kingdom of God, and to shape our lives in accordance with kingdom values, even when such values cause conflict with people around us.

How about that awkward moment when Jesus asks you to *write your will*? This is where the truth of the words of Jesus become painfully clear: "From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." Exactly when does this kind of thing

happen? When you write your will and decide to give 10 percent of your estate to the church.

Conflict arises when sons and daughters, as well as sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, don't get what they think they deserve. But what could be more supportive of the values of God's kingdom than a significant gift to a church or a charity? Church members spend their lives giving a portion of their income to God's work in the church, and it makes perfect sense, at the end of life, to give a similar portion of their estate to God's work. Such a gift is not awkward, despite what disappointed family members might say. Instead, it is entirely consistent with a life of faithful stewardship. Some of you are probably aware that our own congregation has received generous gifts over the years from members that wanted to continue to support the ministry of our church even after they were gone.

Of course, I bet we can think of all kinds of awkward moments that our faith in Jesus may have led us to experience. Like when we are asked to offer forgiveness, let go of a grudge, accept a volunteer assignment, host a luncheon or gathering with newcomers, share one's faith with someone who is inquiring, and so on.

Culpepper also writes, "Repeatedly, the warnings about the coming judgment have forced us to examine the implications of our commitments. It is all too easy to make commitments in one area of life as though they did not affect other areas also. Jesus warned that those who make a commitment to him will be persecuted, that a commitment of faith also means that our attitude toward material possessions must change, and that moral responsibilities must be taken with even greater seriousness...Because our commitment to Christ shapes our values, priorities, goals, and behavior, it also forces us to change old patterns of life, and these changes may precipitate crises in significant relationships.

So...When Jesus asks you to love your enemies, to forgive those who persecute you, to be a servant of all, to speak the truth in love, to pay attention to signs of the kingdom, and write out your will, it could be awkward. We find these circumstances uncomfortable and unsettling. But although they make us squirm, such actions shake up the social order and prepare us for life in the kingdom of God. Yes, awkward situations may be painful now. But in the end, the stress of this life will be replaced by the peace of eternal life with God. And there will be nothing awkward about that. Amen.